

ORIGINAL

Colonia project gets more funds

\$3.6 million
USDA grant
earmarked for
hook-up fees

BY JOYCE LOBECK
SUN STAFF WRITER

Monday was a good day for supporters of an effort to bring sewer service to the thousands of residents of the Avenue B&C Colonia in northwestern Yuma.

A celebratory spirit prevailed as local, state and federal officials announced key progress for the project during a news conference at the Yuma County Board of Supervisors auditorium.

Paperwork has been filed for a \$2 million low-interest loan, which is expected to be the final financing step before the project can progress. The loan is expected to be approved by December by the WIFA (Water Infrastructure Finance Authority of Arizona) board of directors, WIFA officials announced.

In other good news, Ernie Wetherbee, acting state director for USDA Rural Development, announced the agency received confirmation Monday morning of an additional \$3.6 million grant to go toward the hookup fees for each household once the sewer project is completed.

With the new grant, a total of \$16.3 million in federal stimulus dollars has been earmarked for the project by USDA Rural Development, Wetherbee noted.

"In my 25 years with the agency, I'm not aware of a

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\$16 million grant anywhere," he said. "This is huge, well deserved, and well needed."

The colonia suffers from a chronic sewage problem with failing septic systems that present a health hazard to residents and potential contamination of the Colorado River a half mile away, noted Benjamin Grumbles, WIFA chair and new director of the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality.

"This will improve the quality of life of residents," he said. "But it's also a tremendous opportunity for the community to protect the river."

The project has been a long time coming, going back more than 10 years ago, said Gayle Casticone, who spent countless hours going door to door gathering support from her neighbors to form an improvement district.

"The sewer project is

the cornerstone for restoration of the colonia," Casticone said. "When I felt like giving up, I would see the little faces of the head-start children."

With a price tag of more than \$23 million, the biggest obstacle was how to pay for the improvements and still make it affordable for the residents, said Yuma County Supervisor Lenore Stuart.

"We've been very fortunate," she said. "Great grants and the stimulus money."

To leverage funding, USDA Rural Development partnered with the ADEQ, WIFA, the Border Environment Cooperation Commission, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the North American Development Bank for more than \$19 million in grants for the colonia project.

That leaves about \$4 million in loans that colonia residents will have to pay back over the next 25 years.

The colonia covers 361 acres bound by 1st and 8th Streets, and Avenues B and C. It includes about 782 properties and affects 7,500 people, Stuart said.

She said that while great progress has been made, much work still remains to be done by all the agencies involved.

The next step for the Yuma County Board of Supervisors will be a public meeting to gather comments from colonia residents, both for and against the project. The meeting will be held at 6 p.m. Nov. 5 in the supervisors auditorium, 198 S. Main St.

During the meeting, someone will be on hand to help residents figure out their expected assessments for the project to pay back the loans, she said.

Based on comments from the meeting, the supervisors will then decide whether to proceed to the bid process, she said.

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